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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways in which the innate act of "telling" can be used in teaching to strengthen the bond between teacher and student and enrich the process of learning. The paper offers an intuitive rationale for using "telling" as a teaching mode in the community college classroom and provides a formal explanation of "telling" based on the work of theorists in the fields of cognitive science and speech-act theory. Among these theorists are the Russian meta-linguist, M. M. Bakhtin; Jurgen Habermas, the founder of "universal pragmatics"; and Dan Sperber, who developed the general "relevance" theory of communication which suggests that, for communication to occur, the speaker must "make manifest" his/her intention to effect "a change in the listener's cognitive environment" and that this show of intention ("ostension") is a precondition for meaningful exchange. After discussing the relationship between "ostension" and "telling," the paper provides examples of performative teaching that took place in classrooms at Northampton Community College (Pennsylvania) between 1986 and 1988. Dialogues between students and teachers in speech/theater, economics, English literature, composition, and social science classrooms are used to illustrate acts of disclosure, active listening, restatement, and teaching within the context of interrogating learners. Concluding comments indicate that all acts of "telling" share the intention of reaching understanding and that from this common ground they diverge according to the demands of course content and mutual cognitive environments. (JMC)

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WHOLE TEACHING: PERFORMATIVE ACTS IN GOOD FAITH

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"It is customary to speak about the authorial masks. But in which utterance is there ever a face and not a mask...?"

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May 1989

Princeton University Mid-Career Fellowship Program

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THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

The large room is dimly lit by nite-lite, the season early December of short afternoons and expectant evenings. An adult male voice is sounding out the perennial tale of assorted marvels and revealed meanings. They listen as if to the father's voice, or drift off in their own musings.

The setting is a major Eastern university, the listeners comprise a learner elite. The tale is of Brancusi's decisive break with the sculpture of Rodin, a tale the speaker knows well. "Brancusi moved away from the High European pedigree of Rodin's art, a pedigree extending back to Michelangelo" could not be better said in prose. It is prose, echoing a text lodged in memory or one in the making. "In Brancusi's HEAD we no longer find expressed the chaos from within ... in its place, the equi-poise of the ideated thing." The speaker's voice, neutrally pitched, reflects his confidence in knowledge firmly set in context. Those listening know to trust his tale. Its pleasures are pleasures of text. And of the eye.

With all eyes on the illuminated screen in front, no eye-contact between interlocutors need interfere with transmission of received truth. In this case listening is a lot like reading, something the learner elite are proficient in. They turn attention to their pads to record the canonical truths, then back to the screen and more aural-visual being. Cognition takes care of itself.

The professor's speech act is "echoic" of a ghost text, and as seamless. It can be taken as a rather pure example of the instructional mode called "texting." University of Arizona

professors Richardson, Fisk, and Okun, analyzing the broader swath of community college instruction, define "texting" as the use of reading and writing [and, by extension, lecture] to develop in the learner a mature literacy. In sharp contrast to "texting" the authors place "bitting," or the use of linguistic activities that result in the lesser ability to "understand or produce language [information] when presented with specific external cues":

> Students were bitting when they read and copied from the blackboard a list of names that the instructor pointed to and identified as important and when they later recognized these names on a multiple-choice test. They were engaged in a somewhat more independent form of bitting when they skimmed a textbook to find answers to study-guide questions in preparation for a multiple-choice test. (65)

It is the "texting"mode that is endangered by "information-transfer coursework

> oriented toward efficient communication of specific facts from instructor to student. Teaching and learning styles reflect this one-way transmission of low-level knowledge, and all aspects of the classroom context facilitate this goal. (52)

> Students seemed to recognize this aspect of instructor style and to accept it because there was so much material to "get through." (47)

This orientation the authors see as a threat to the very standard of educated literacy.

Their critique of a tendency in community college practice is on target. Ever more direct modes of "information transfer" have compromised the roles not only of written and spoken discourse but of mind. Even in the arts and sciences, where

knowledge is necessarily discursive, ways have been found to make it palatably informational. Bitting-across-the-curriculum.

But there is another story. Running counter to both the "biting" tendency of the times and the "texting" of academe is a renewable resource that owes to native acts of "telling" what the other practices owe to information systems and mandarin textuality. Telling in teaching is the story of this paper.

TELLING'S STORY

Underlying Telling's story is a belief in teaching as a form of ritual communication between the generations. Like other ritual communications (the father-son/mother-daughter talk, cautionary tales of the tribe), Telling succeeds by force of interactive identification. In these forms, where identification precedes understanding, qualities of truthfulness and trust count for everything. Their desired outcome is a strengthened ego-identity and learner.

Telling finds the novice in the learner, the wished-for empty vessel. It recovers the amateur in the didact, the one still engaged in self-validating what he knows. Acts of telling focus the mind on the knowing itself, so that truth becomes more than its factual proposition. Qualities of intuition, uncertainty, even contradiction, strengthen the bond between knower and learner and enrich the knowing.

Expressed above is the largely intuitive case for Telling's emergence as a teaching mode of preference in the community college classroom, a case from which experienced teachers will hardly dissent. Nobody just lectures anymore. And yet, and yet ... how keen is lecture's appeal to professional ego! Come to

that, what is the difference between course content directly, efficiently, conveyed and this specially designated Telling? Beginning with Noam Chomsky's signal work Syntactic Structures (1957), the twin domains of cognitive science and speech-act theory have opened the terrain to formal explanation.

THREE FELLOW TRAVELERS

The Russian meta-linguist M. M. Bakhtin based his original readings of great texts (Rabelais, Dostoevsky) on a "dialogic" model of communication. There is, for Bakhtin, no one-way transmission of silent, textual meaning. Rather a text contains "captured speech" that calls forth response in the reader/other. Anything less than dialogic "relation" is mere abstracted meaning -- a product of language cut off from its primary function in communication.

Language's primary function is the speech-utterance that forms "a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances":

> Any understanding of live speech, live utterance, is inherently responsive, ... the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening -- sometimes literally from the speaker's first word.
>
> And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution etc. (68)

For language to achieve full dialogic relation, it must take on the properties of speech-utterance. Foremost among these is "change of speaking subjects," at which point the listener be-

comes the speaker":

> This change can only take place because the speaker has said (or written) everything he wishes to say at a particular moment or under particular circumstances. This all -- the indicator of the wholeness of the utterance -- is subject neither to grammatical nor to abstract semantic definition. When hearing or reading, we clearly sense the end of the utterance, as if we hear the speaker's concluding dixi .... The first and foremost criterion for the finalization of an utterance is the possibility of responding to it. (76)

Lacking properties of "wholeness," the language-assertion remains enclosed in a monologic context:

> it is not demarcated on either side by a change of speaking subjects; it has neither direct contact with extraverbal reality nor a direct relation to others' utterances; it does not have semantic fullness of value; and it has no capacity to determine directly the responsive position of the other. (74)

Only abstracted meaning can result from monologic speech.

Jurgen Habermas is a West German social scientist whose "universal pragmatics" places speech-acts at the heart of the social reality. Communication has one overriding goal and that is "reaching understanding." Complicating this goal, however, is language's "double structure":

> Thus the peculiar reflexivity of natural language rests in the first instance on the combination of a content -- effected in an objectifying attitude -- with a communication concerning the relational aspect in which the content is to be understood -- effected in a performative attitude. (43)

This framing power of performative attitude, 'objective' assumptions about communication naively overlook. In them performative attitude is "no longer interpreted as a specific mode of reaching understanding but, falsely, as part of the

information transmitted."

> In this perspective the relational aspect loses its independence vis a vis the content aspect; the communication role of an utterance loses its constitutive significance, and is "added" to the information content. (43)

Far from being accompaniment, the performative attitude grounds the speech-act and sets its term of validity. In so far as "speech acts can be valid only with respect to the fundamental claim that the speaker [in his performative attitude] raises," Habermas is led to formulate a three-fold "validity basis of speech." First, in the informative attitude, the speaker proffers an "obligation to provide grounds ... and to recur if necessary to the experiential source from which [he] draws the certainty that his statement is true." Second, in the interactive attitude he opens up to the validation the "rightness" (or "appropriateness") of his speech-act in relation to the listener. Third, in the expressive attitude he enters into "obligation to prove trustworthy" (63-4).

> ... a speech act counts as acceptable only if the speaker not merely feigns but sincerely makes a serious offer ... . In every instance of communicative action the system of all [three] validity claims comes into play; they must always be raise simultaneously, although they cannot all be thematic [made explicit] at the same time. (66)

> ... in the final analysis, the speaker can [performatively] influence the hearer because speech-act typically commitments are connected with congnitively testable validity claims -- that is, because the reciprocal bonds have a rational basis. (63)

It was left to a younger cognitive scientist, Dan Sperber of the Centre National de al Recharche Scientifique in Paris, to

entail these "cognitively testable claims" with a general "relevance" theory of communication. In **Relevance** (1986), Sperber presented his model for "ostensive-inferential" communication. For communication to occur, the speaker must "make manifest" his intention to effect "a change in the listener's cognitive environment" (58). This show of intention ("ostension") is a precondition for meaningful exchange. According to Sperber

> When a coded signal, or any other arbitrary piece of behavior is used ostensively, the evidence displayed bears directly on the individual's communicative intention, and only indirectly on the basic layer of information she wishes to make manifest. (53)

On the evidence of this ostension, comprehension proceeds inferentially: the listener forms a string of assumptions entailing the linguistic content, communicative intention, and a set of basic deductive rules for processing them (`If this, that'; `if this, not that'; `if this and that, both or either,' etc.). On the strength of the assumptions thus generate, "relevance" ("change in cognitive environment") is or is not achieved. Sperber concludes:

> In the case of ostensive-inferential communication [there must be] internal language rich enough to represent the intentions of others and not to allow for complex inferential processes ... . The fact is that human external languages do not encode the kind of information that humans are interested in communication. Linguistically encoded semantic representations are abstract mental structures which must be inferentially enriched before they can be taken to represent anything of interest. (174)

TELLING'S OSTENSION

Both Sperber and Habermas were explicit about their intention to provide communication with an explanatory model the formal equivalent of Chomsksy's "universal grammar." With his ostensive-inferential model, Sperber has constructed the cognitive mechanism beneath Bakhtin's wholeness-of-utterance, Habermas's validity claims, and this paper's preference for Telling in the classroom. Telling's ostension might run "... I know you're out there ... my knowledge is importantly true [worth your time] ... the knowing is my own .. I am/it is knowable to you." The responsive listener might form this string of validating assumptions: " ... his words are his own ... he means them [to be importantly true] ... they carry his true thoughts ... they are/he is knowable to me."

The belief held here is that an 'assumption of wholeness' by the learner is a precondition for his sustained cognition (learning). Owing to divergences in performative intention, competence, and learner aptitude, this 'assumption of wholeness' will not always be simple or consensual. In the case of the art historian, his performative act was whole enough for perhaps a majority of his gifted listeners. His appeal would be to a like-minded didacticism in them -- well versed, articulate etc. Reliance on a ghost text would not seem disqualifying (it might even be validating).

That appeal would not, however, be strong enough to make active learners/viewers out of those uninitiated in art or criticism (not a small minority). "He knows his stuff" was for them the likely terminus assumption, in which case they gave

themselves over to something like rote comprehension.

Most of the class would be able, when asked, to recount the story of Brancusi's break with Rodin. The major part of the speaker's intention -- to inform about a paradigm shift in twentieth century art -- would have been realized without the other aims of appropriateness or trustworthiness (in a more fundamental sense) ever being at issue. His performative act is what Habermas terms "institutionally bound": the speaker-centered claims are settled **normatively, in advance.** (54)

This is not a promising scenario for the open-access classroom, where the trust factor is never far from the surface and the claim of trustworthiness never settled in advance. The propositional truth of what is told -- as it obtains in the objective world -- is perhaps the last claim to make an impression. In this open-to-question environment, Telling enjoys clear advantages over either lecture or information-transfer. It is to performative acts of Telling, observed in classrooms at Northampton Community College 1986-88, that we turn next.

TELLING OBSERVED

Professor Norman Roberts, Department of Speech/Theatre, might be said to have the natural domain for Telling. In fact he himself is a natural teller. It is, in his case, the near opposite of role-playing. What you get is his intention to **make himself known** directly, without interference from script or position.

Surprisingly, this directness takes some getting used to. In effect on has to **learn** it -- how to use it to listen independ-

ently and well. Whether the assignment is story-telling "that reveals another side of you," or "holding on to remembered emotion" in approaching a scene, the way to it is through Roberts' slow but thorough and finally necessary act of "disclosure." His is a performative act but not an institutionally bound one, and that makes it a radical form of classroom instruction.

[lesson on recalling a misunderstanding based on role]

> Your father died within the last year and your mother is slow in coming around. You feel sorry for her. One night out of pity you ask her to go with you and some friends to Castle Gardens for live music. To your amazement, she says yes and once there has a good time. But in the days following, both you and she act embarrassed. She is, if anything, more withdrawn than before.
>
> What happened?

Upon first utterance of "your father is dead" the mind is reeling. And the incongruous mention of Castle Garden and live music doesn't help. What did the mother feel there? Afterwards? in the imagination, someone else's story (whose?) has become one's own.

Roberts' Telling derives naturally, insistently, from his heartland farm background and subsequent training in the "Method" at Illinois State's theatre department. It centers on acts of disclosure. What, then, is being disclosed? Again and again: the <u>ostension</u> fundamental to being human. Master acting teacher Richard Boleslavsky underscores for the actor the primacy of intention: "Remember this is fundamental work -- to be able 'to be' what he desires consciously and exactly" (42). In this teaching imitates art.

Ostensive disclosure in a different key is what economic

professor Bajway Mohammud offers up. Taking full advantage of his role as Mysterious Other, the native Pakistani cajoles his listeners into a lively encounter with Otherness and post-Keynesian microeconomics. Ruses such as "model student of the week" (who is given frequent opportunity to prove herself the dunce) keep the action going and clear the circuits for an occasional deeper glimpse into the man. Discussing the "kinky" oligopoly curve, Bajwa recommends the students take a closer look at "that other British economist, Mrs. [Joan] Robinson. She was a tough old lady. Even Lord Keynes feared her. Her criticism in the thirties of imperfect competition was very important to my class."

Recalled in the recent context of Benizer Bhutto's assumption of her father's mantle of power amidst general Muslim incitement, Bajwa's civilized witness to a longstanding business class in Pakistan makes that country's affairs seem more of this world, less the phantasmagorical hell of a Salman Rushdie fiction.

English professor Julie Houston exemplifies a practice to which Carl Rogers gave the name "active listening" -- restatement of what the learner has just expressed, often interpolated to invite further expression and exchange. It is a natural extension of Telling, given Telling's intention to alter the cognitive environment of the learner and reach understanding.

H: We have seen such antics on the moor, but now who has a comment on the Fool's role (referring back to study questions).?

L: Fool is Lear's Conscience, the wide-awake one.

H: He's saying "wake up."

L: He's reflecting on Lear's mind, his emotions.

H: Interesting. Like the Greek chorus he clarifies the protagonist's dilemma.

L: He seems to carry Shakespeare's thoughts.

H: We've already said **Lear** contains both profound and absurd matter. Does Fool carry either?

L: (not biting) I look to Fool to show me what is being experienced, and its deeper meaning.

Houston personal articulation is part reticence, part candor. It reflects well her own early, Quaker day-school education:

> ...question of why the paint washes off, why does Fool disappear, why is Lear's conscience going away? ...the honest ones have to go into disguise to preserve the truth ...the taking off of defense mechanisms ...so much "offing" here

--these in response to learner assertion. "When Shakespeare affirms life, there is always the prospect of death, a true view." It is the Liberal Arts Tradition, alive and well.

A variation on restatement is practiced by Mary Jane Hemphill. Also in English, Professor Hemphill addresses the learner in the diction of a (decidedly benign) boardroom or public hearing, thus elevating the thing said to a context of educated adult discourse. The lesson is about paragraphing logic in a professional writer's essay:

> "I think it's a sensible case you're making (for an alternative closure sentence)."
>
> "What you're arguing for is reasonable; we are experiencing a difference in preference."

"You've noticed something (in the argument) that is possibly true but it's something we don't need to hold on to right now."

By such means are the learners invited into the community of reasoning adults. M.J. Hemphill's ostension runs: you are capable of thinking something worth my while; you are a worthwhile person and apprentice. Her students respond to this appeal in kind: with thoughtful acknowledgment.

A third, more aggressive kind of Telling I will call Interrogating Learner Context. The social sciences would seem to invite this approach; two worthy interrogators were observed in introductory classes of sociology and psychology. Sociology professor Rick Stinson opens the session with a barb and a riddle: "Interesting phenomenon that after every exam attendance goes way down. Individual reasons add up to a social pattern" (this deployed as a non-answer negative to "Do you have our tests?"). Stinson continues, unrepentant:

> I want to talk about minorities today. (I'll hand them back on Thursday.) Sociologists mean by minority, 'disadvantaged by ascribed group difference.' Numerical minority alone does not count.
>
> [So far assertion of the pundit variety, but this speaker is clearly circling a spot of turf; he's 'after something.' His listeners eye the turf on the top of their desks, uncomfortable and closing ranks.]
>
> S: Minorities can outgrow disadvantaged status. The question for sociology is how or how not particular groups outgrow disadvantage. The answer...The Civil War was a major occasion for capital formation and new industry. When was Bethlehem Steel founded?
>
> Learner: About the turn of the century?
>
> S: I wouldn't be surprised there are institutional prototypes extending back to the

Civil War period. (Note the ages of mansions in Fountain Hill.) The need for new labor was greatest in the period 1880-1920, and new immigration laws reflect this ... . Industrialization was the real engine for the rise of minority groups, then for their assimilation. All this happened according to a Melting Pot ideal for American. Now, who came?

L: (after a pause) Polish. (laughter)

S: What is your ethnic background?

L: Me? (grudgingly) Italian. (laughter)

S: Who in your family came? And when?

L: My great-grandparents. I don't know when. (laughter)

S: Can you speak Italian?

L: Swear

S: But not survive in an Italian-speaking society. So your family has been assimilated into the Anglo-American society.

L: Guess so.

Other L: Doesn't that have a lot to do with how you're brought up? If he was brought up in Italy he would speak Italian. If you want the rights of this country you have to speak English.

[Suddenly a flurry of comment about the rightness of this view, the stupidity of bilingual education, of Spanish-speaking requirements in Sun-Belt cities etc. S. aggress that these are example of imperfect assimilation; reminds learners that language maintenance is central to maintenance of a culture.]

S: So why were the first wave of immigrants willing to give up their native language? And who were they? I'm not sure we've identified the first wave. Think of the local natives. (laughter)
Learners: Welsh ... Irish ... Pennsylvania Dutch. (laughter)

S: So English-speakers and Northern Europeans,

and then it was down-hill from there. Polish, Italians, Greeks. (laughter) Who gave up more to melt into this pot? [this question more liberally responded to] And now Blacks, Hispanics, Asians. What's new in this picture?

L (black female): But we were brought here ... in the last century, I think.

S: Even earlier. They why are blacks still identified with the newer minorities?

Other L: Because they never assimilated.

Other L: Because they are other races.

S: If we say statistically all these things have happened to other ethnics, then what is happening to Hispanics and Asians fall somewhere in between

We'll pick up here on Thursday.

The class ends at a high level of idea conflict, engaged in dialogic disclosure if not yet understanding [Do I think ethnic group, economic class, race, or just what happens statistically?]. The teacher is on the line to clarify and prove trustworthy.

SUMMA

Acts of Telling share a single intention: to reach understanding. From this common ground they diverge according to demands of course content and mutual cognitive environments. A closer look at Telling redirects attention back to the `whole' learner, who must be engaged **cognitively** through performative acts that are psychologically real and **make an offer**. The reasonable question for the teacher: how, short of natural gift, effect this double-bond communication? The answer is also reasonable: become the whole learner over again; recover the knowing that made a first deep impression.

Inside most teachers is not a theoretical biologist, cultural historian, or creative artist trapped and waiting to get out. What is there is a gleaner in a field of plenty. And, as in life, potentially a sharer. Community college teachers have particular reason to prolong the life of the amateur in themselves, not so far removed from the novice learner in their classrooms. This threatens no loss of authority, since ostension set toward reaching understanding is intrinsically, humanly, impressive. **Telling** is the identity here assigned to converging teaching practices. Taken together they may constitute a truly adaptive response to the poet's age-old quarrel with academe:

> I think of the huge armies of teachers (no disrespect to you!) engaged in making whole encyclopedias of statements seem self-evident axioms, to go unquestioned and un-found-out for the future. The fresh discovery a man makes is examined and has meaning; what he leans at school has only purpose, not his own purpose either. The newspapers, the popularizers of all degrees -- hateful in their usefulness. You cannot be useful and retain possession of your own mind.
>
> (Basil Bunting letter to Louis Zukofsky, 273)

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